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Taiwan's Sunflower Protest: Digital Anatomy of a Movement¹

Tracey Cheng

On March 18th, 2014, hundreds of students occupied the “Legislative Yuan”, Taiwan’s parliament, to protest against the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA). A network of tech-savvy volunteers immediately began to use digital tools to broadcast their message to sympathizers and the public. Soon, thousands of citizens rallied on the streets outside the parliament to support the students inside. This movement became known as the “Sunflower Movement.”



[Image 1] Credit: Gazhua Jiang.

1 Additional writing and support by Peichieh Chen, additional editing by Taylor Dalrymple, and final edit by Hanns-Peter Nagel.

In the eyes of many students, CSSTA had been hastily signed between the respective governments of Taiwan and China without fully informing the Taiwanese public of what it entails. Taiwan's government asserted that the agreement would boost Taiwan's faltering economy, but students thought it would result in Taiwan becoming too dependent on China at the expense of Taiwan's relations with other allies, and thus become vulnerable to political pressure from Beijing.



[Image 2] Students occupying the Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's parliament. Credit: Occupy Taiwan Legislature by Voice of America. Licensed under Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

On March 23rd, protesters broke into the Executive Yuan building, the seat of Taiwan's executive branch. Riot police evicted them by force. A national uproar ensued and resentment toward the government reached another level, partly fueled by the global support for the Sunflower Movement's nonviolent protests. On March 30th, just 12 days into the movement, students organized a demonstration that saw more than 500,000 Taiwanese citizens taking to the streets in support of their cause.

The government could not withstand the pressure. In a speech, Legislative Speaker Wang Jin-Pyng accepted the demands of the protestors. The movement officially concluded on April 10th when the students who had been occupying the parliament left the premises.

The Sunflower Movement became one of the biggest political movements in the past 30 years of Taiwan history. It awoke a younger generation's awareness about politics, democracy and the identity of Taiwan as a country.

However, what most stood out about this movement was its clever use of technology and digital media. Enabled by the fast collaboration of a self-organized group of volunteers, the movement took flight in ways never seen

before and immediately garnered the attention of Taiwanese citizens worldwide in record time.



[Image 3] Symbol of the #CongressOccupied movement in Taiwan, March 2014. Credit: <http://dd-jack.tumblr.com/>.

Having it Covered: Live Streaming the Movement

From the very first moment of the occupation, setting up an ongoing live broadcast from inside the parliament became a top priority. It was so important, a photo of a pair of flip-flops supporting the iPad used to film and live stream the event during the first hours of the occupation turned into an iconic image.

Live streaming was later taken over by gov.tw¹, a website launched in 2012 and run by more than 100 members. Their mission: create an open and transparent government so that citizens can make better informed decisions. Over the past few years the group had worked on several projects with the goal of delivering easy-to-understand information to Taiwan citizens by using simplified graphics, web pages and layman's terms.

To broadcast the unfolding event, the gov.tw team's first challenge was to set up a stable and reliable wireless internet environment – the lifeblood of the movement. At first, they tried working with existing WiMAX networks but then moved on to constructing their own servers when it became clear that they would need faster service to keep up with the amount of traffic they were receiving.

Now, instead of relying only on mainstream media, volunteers and the public had a faster and more reliable way of obtaining information. Over

time, an impressive list of related links to the movement and transcripts of all the major speeches and announcements was compiled on gov.tw's official webpage for the movement.² The gov.tw team and their site were an important part of the success of the March 30th rally because of the technical support they were able to provide despite the massive turnout of 500,000 people.



[Image 4] A pair of flip-flops and a live-streaming iPad became to symbolize the Sunflower Movement's digital DNA. Credit: Diung Libiu / Chang Liyou.

Throughout the occupation, gov.tw and its many supporters relied heavily on Hackpad, a collective editing tool similar to Google Docs. Hackpad was adopted early on and was ultimately responsible for ensuring the successful collaboration of more than 1500 volunteers with transcript and data documentation.³ Due to the heavy traffic on Hackpad as the movement gathered steam, its servers were completely overloaded more than five times in just three days, necessitating the addition of extra servers to keep up with the demand.

Crowdfunding Success Breaking Records

Around-the-clock live streaming and heavy social media use quickly turned the protest into a larger movement. But in order to spread the message more effectively, the movement needed something movements typically lack: money.

Crowdfunding was the natural solution. The students set up a funding project on FlyingV.cc⁴, one of the leading crowdfunding websites in Taiwan. Within 12 hours, the goal of 6.3 million NTD (\$210,000) was reached. This money funded

full-page advertisements in one of the major newspapers in Taiwan as well as the New York Times.

The funding campaign for the Sunflower Movement became Taiwan's fastest crowdfunding project to reach its goal, despite the lack of any prior planning. The accompanying website 4am.tw⁵ was designed and constructed within 24 hours by an all-volunteer force of 10 translators and four engineers.

For crowd-funding platform FlyingV, the story didn't end there. The start-up was fined 50,000 NTD (\$1,700) for violating their contract with Gre Tai Securities Market by assisting in the crowdfunding for a social movement. FlyingV responded by announcing their plans to develop an alternative crowd-funding site not under contract with Gre Tai Securities Market. VDemocracy.tw⁶ was launched on April 7th, 2014.

Transparency Volunteers in Action

An amazing number of people were willing to step up for the cause. In a short time, supporters became active volunteers. The driving force behind this rapid groundswell of support was the perceived lack of transparency and loss of trust in the government.

Determined to shed more light on government action, the movement put a strong focus on growing the public's awareness on the issues through a continuous supply of information.

Here are three examples of websites that were launched after the movement started to encourage Taiwanese citizens to exercise their civil rights and defend their livelihoods against the perceived threat of the CSSTA.

How Your Company will be Affected by the CSSTA (你被服冒了嗎)⁷

Enter any company's registered name to this website and it will show if and how the company will be affected by the CSSTA according to the current terms of the agreement. The use of witty graphics and layman's terms on the website aims to make this serious topic accessible to everyone.

CSSTA Battle (服冒東西軍)⁸

This website offers a compilation of both positive and negative news and opinions about CSSTA. The movement and its demands received a lot of media attention which led to a significant growth in debate around the trade agreement. Information such as the actual terms of the agreement, the process of how it was to be passed, the legitimacy of the occupation at the parliament,



[Image 5] How will your company be affected by CSSTA tells visitors what the trade agreement means to them. Credit: <http://tisa.gov.tw/>.

and police actions to disperse the crowd on March 24th became hot topics once the general public took note of the whole situation. The site makes it easy for visitors to browse topics they find interesting and offers opposing arguments without censorship.

Review Our Own CSSTA (自己的服貿自己審)⁹

The Sunflower Movement started as a response to a controversial and obscure process to pass the trade agreement with China. This blatant disregard of the legal process outraged many citizens. They now want to have a hand in the oversight of the trade agreement since they no longer trust the government to do so on their behalf. This website breaks down complex regulations, rendering them clearer and easier to understand. It also provides transcripts from previous public hearings, all the related public hearing recordings, and clauses of the agreement.

[Image 6] The Appendectomy project adds a slightly disturbing medical analogy to the impeachment of legislators. Credit: Appendectomy Project, <http://appy.tw/>.

Aftermath: The Sunflower's Legacy

As the Sunflower Movement came to a close, the question on many peoples' minds became: "What happens now that the parliament will no longer be occupied?"

Some felt that it was the right time for the movement to end while others thought that doing so equaled surrendering their leverage over the government. In response to this vigorous debate, a new project started to gain momentum. The Appendectomy Project¹⁰ is an online platform designed to rally supporters to impeach legislators who have lost the confidence of the public. The project is based on the premise that all citizens have the right to remove their representatives from office when they think it is necessary. Despite the fact that the requirements for impeachment are rigorous, the residents of certain electoral districts are still pursuing this course for targeted politicians.

The Legacy

The Sunflower Movement has been described as a highly technologically-oriented social movement. Since a majority of participants were students, it was only natural that the movement reflected the digital age in which this generation was born.

The movement left several important legacies behind; it notably created several successful digital strategies ready for adoption by other groups fighting for social change. Case in point: Taiwan's resurgent anti-nuclear power movement, born right after the Sunflower protests and using a similar digital playbook.

The success of the movement was underscored by the change of attitude towards politics and society by the younger generation; this transformation becomes all the more obvious when contrasted with the absence of high-tech communications in the political struggles of earlier generations.

Although it remains to be seen if the government will make good on its promise to properly review the CSSTA, the Sunflower Movement marks the beginning of a new era in Taiwan's social movements with its digital success story: the online protest that resulted in and supported a turnaround of public opinion.

Endnotes

- 1 gov. <http://gov.tw/en-US/index.html>.
- 2 "Congress Occupied." gov. <http://gov.today/congressoccupied>.
- 3 "gov." Hakpad. <https://gov.hackpad.com/>.
- 4 FlyingV. <http://www.flyingv.cc/>.
- 5 Democracy at 4 am. <http://4am.tw/>.
- 6 VDemocracy. <http://VDemocracy.tw/>.
- 7 "How Your Company Will be Affected by the CSSTA?" gov. <http://tisa.gov.tw/>.
- 8 "CSSTA Battle." Speaking. <http://ecfa.speaking.tw/imho.php>.
- 9 "Review Our Own CSSTA." Fumao. <http://review.fumao.today/>.
- 10 Appendectomy Project. <http://appy.tw/>.

Further Readings

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Annotation

Puthiya Purayil Sneha

The Sunflower Movement is an important landmark in the history of democratic struggles in Taiwan. The movement has been lauded particularly for its scale and complexity of organization, with the use of digital technologies and the Internet being one of its key features. But the protests become particularly significant because of their immense geopolitical implications, due to Taiwan's disputed political status and its checkered history of problems with China. Taiwan, or the Republic of China (ROC) as it is officially known, was formed after the Chinese Civil War, and since then has been the subject of several debates about its sovereign status, and attempts at reunification with the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Cross Strait Services Trade Agreement (CSSTA), which is the focus of the protest, is important for the economic benefits and growth that it was deemed to bring for both states, due to increased employment and removal of trade barriers. However the manner of its negotiation and its representation in public is a matter of concern, as it is viewed as an attempt by China to exert more political influence over Taiwan and also as a cover for reunification with the mainland. The CSSTA is part of the Economic Cooperation Framework agreement

signed between Taiwan and China in 2010, an agreement which has also been intensely debated due to lack of clarity over its stated objectives of economic growth. The CSSTA was therefore proposed for a clause-by-clause review in the legislature, a move supported by the Democratic People's Party (DPP), and many Taiwanese citizens. The breakdown of these negotiations, and an attempt by the Kuomintang (KMT)-led government to put the agreement to vote and pass it without review, caused the final upsurge amongst protesters, leading them to occupy the Legislative Yuan on March 18, 2014.

As mentioned in the article, the Sunflower Movement has been appreciated in Taiwan and all over the world for introducing a young, neo-liberal and supposedly 'apolitical' generation to a history of political protests and democratic debates. However, Taiwanese youth are no strangers to protests or public campaigns, given the country's vibrant history of student movements, with some recent examples being the Wild Lily Movement and the Wild Strawberry movement. This movement therefore reiterates that political awareness and activity is not a generational myth. The effective use of the Internet and other multi-media tools point at the advanced digital proficiency and access of a large section of people across Taiwan. At a time when the

international mainstream media was divided between covering a political crisis in Ukraine and a missing Malaysian plane, the protesters were resourceful in employing an array of technologies efficiently to process information that poured in from all quarters, and to reach out to the rest of the world. The protest demonstrated its core objective of pushing for transparency and accountability in legislation and governance by setting up a live stream of video from the Legislative Yuan, making their activities open to the public through social media and tools such as Hackpad and Google Docs, and crowd-sourcing funding for materials and resources through an online platform. Apart from the implicit reliability and speed of digital networks, the manner in which the protest was organized also indicated a network of trust that people had in the movement, and in everybody involved, which enabled such transparent and open communication. However, the network also suffered from a glitch wherein erroneous messages were sent out through Facebook and messaging apps to a large group of protesters at a critical juncture, when they were about to occupy the Executive Yuan. This glitch, which was presumably the result of attempts by outsiders or pro-CSSTA activists to misappropriate information, points to the vulnerability of online networks, wherein almost the entire strategy to occupy the Executive building was compromised. As a result of the confusion, riot police could forcefully evict protesters from the streets and

areas around the Executive Yuan, this time using violence as the numbers were also much fewer than expected. The use of technology as part of these protests, which seemed to be its biggest strength, also became a big weakness at one point.

The movement ended on April 10, 2014, when Legislative Speaker Wang Jin-pyng assured protestors that their demands would be heeded, and legislation monitoring all cross-strait agreements would be passed soon. Protesters vacated the legislature, but not before cleaning the place, and assuring citizens that the movement would continue in different ways. This is seen in the form of the Appendectomy project, for example which pushes for more accountability of elected officials through campaigns to review their work and remove corrupt or incompetent people from office. The Sunflower movement is said to have been influential in spurring other protests such as the anti-nuclear movement in Taiwan, and the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong, all of which adopted similar digital methods. The protest is also significant in thinking about the solidarity it evoked in people across social and economic barriers and the complicated nature of sovereignty in a disputed, or 'non-state.' When there is a lack of clarity regarding the identity of the state, the notion of community and demands on democracy become even more rigorous and are defended greatly. The Sunflower movement was important as it was able to reach out to a cross section of people in Taiwan

and across the world who wanted to contribute in every way possible, as seen in the case of the florist who handed out one thousand sunflowers to protesters on the first day. That act gave the movement its name, and its ultimate objective, to keep hope and the voice of reason alive in times of strife.

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